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ABSTRACT

The quality of a literacy program can be assessed by taking into account the following factors: purpose of the program, how the program meets the most important current needs of the adult population, if it is accessible to the people who need services, and whether the literacy content is relevant to learners' needs. Flexibility of funding also is important. Assessment can be carried out on two levels--program evaluation and learner assessment. Criteria for funding a literacy program include the following: Does this program have the particular emphasis determined for current literacy funding priorities? Is this a high-quality program, according to "Model Indicators" by the U.S. Department of Education? Is the program achieving the particular purpose and specific goals it was set up to achieve? Is this an established, proven, high-quality program? or Is this a new program that has promise? The following are some best practices in literacy: using the most current teaching methods, including the contextual approach, the learner-centered approach, the participatory approach, and the use of new learning technology. (This paper includes a synopsis of the U.S. Department of Education Model Indicators of Program Quality.) (KC)

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THE LITERACY SERIES

WHAT MAKES A QUALITY LITERACY PROGRAM?

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
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WHAT MAKES A QUALITY LITERACY PROGRAM?

One Worth Funding? How Do We Evaluate That Quality?

TO ASSESS THE QUALITY OF A LITERACY PROGRAM

To assess program quality, you will want to consider the following factors:

The purpose of the literacy program. Quality is measured, in part, by how well the program is meeting its stated purpose. For example, is the purpose:

- To serve those who have not been reached by other literacy programs in your area?
- To improve literacy skills among children in public schools by working with care-givers and children?
- To help learners achieve immediate functional goals (for example, obtain a better job)?
- To help develop motivation, habits and skills for lifelong learning?

Quality can be evaluated at two levels. You can evaluate quality at the **organization or overall program level** (management, infrastructure) and at the **service level** (strengthening literacy). In literacy, these two levels are called (1) PROGRAM EVALUATION and (2) LEARNER ASSESSMENT. Learner assessment is the evaluation of how learners are meeting their learning needs, while program evaluation is the evaluation of the *overall* program which *includes* learner assessment. Elements of *program quality evaluation* include community needs assessment, program planning processes, board involvement and effectiveness, learner involvement, attrition rate, long-term impacts on learners, and cost-effectiveness. Elements of *learning quality* include: interviews with learners about their goals and needs, learner feedback on teaching approaches and materials, learners' assessment of their progress in meeting their goals, a display of what learners produced and tests of educational gains.

In quality programs, both program evaluation and learner assessment are ongoing processes; both include all players, *valuing and using learners' feedback* as much as staff's and administrators'; and both observe process as well as effectiveness based on purpose and standards. They are used not only to keep stakeholders informed about a program's progress but also *to improve the program.* Both can be derived through two methods: *quantitative* and *qualitative evaluation.* Quantitative indicators tend to be more objective and numerically measurable, and can be standardized across sites (such as drop-out rate or pre-/post-test scores). Qualitative indicators tend to be more subjective, tailored to measure outcomes in the unique learner or program, and measurable through comparisons (such as review of program plans, or interviews with learners about how well the program meets their needs). To evaluate quality, it is useful to look for both quantitative and qualitative measures of program evaluation and learner assessment.

FROM UNITED WAY DIRECTORS: WHAT MAKES A LITERACY PROGRAM ONE WORTH FUNDING?

"As a first step, I make sure the program fits what our United Way has defined as priority funding. For example: Does the program reach a large audience through a public-television program accompanied by print materials, or a small audience through one-to-one personalized individualized tutoring? Does it focus on adults reading below the 6th-grade level, or on youth in our public high schools who need remedial tutoring? Does it teach literacy skills for immediate use, or for the long term (learn-how-to-learn skills)? As a second step, I make sure the program has a good track record; I prefer to look at grade-level advancement based on standardized tests. As a last step, if I still can't decide between worthy programs, I'll look at other factors: how cost-effective they are, how they judge their own performance, whether they have trained providers who can motivate learners." *(Charles Colvin, Montgomery Area United Way, Alabama—Metro II)*

"Our criteria for funding literacy programs: (1) That the program meets the most important *current* needs of our adult population—and these needs change. (For example, we are losing our major employer, the Air Force base, and there will be new literacy needs for these displaced employees.) (2) That it is accessible to the people who need services (time of day, and geographically—especially important for us in our large rural county). (3) That the literacy content is relevant to learners' 'real life' literacy needs." *(Susanne Sandusky, United Way of Aroostook, Maine—Metro VII)*

"I look for the responsiveness of the proposal to those needs identified in our community—who needs literacy most and where they are; where the gaps in services are. I also look for sensitivity to ethnic and cultural practices, and for accessibility to learners who are hardest to reach. I do use quantitative evaluation, such as average length of stay in the program, but I think qualitative evaluation is just as useful; for example: asking learners questions about their programs." *(Sharon Morioka, United Way of San Diego, California—Metro I)*

"The flexibility of funding is important: We must allow opportunities for creativity and fund newer innovative programs that demonstrate viability—as well as the proven and established programs. Programs that lack steady funding resources also should be given funding consideration." *(Jeannette Morrison-Marks, United Way of Oakland County, Michigan—Metro II)*

CRITERIA FOR FUNDING A LITERACY PROGRAM

In assessing whether or not you want to fund a literacy program, the following criteria may be helpful:

_____ Does this program have the particular emphasis determined for our literacy funding priorities? (For example, "This year, our United Way will fund literacy for public-housing residents—or job-related literacy—or family literacy.")

_____ Is this a quality program, according to *Model Indicators* by the U.S. Department of Education? (See summary below.)

_____Is the program achieving the particular purpose and specific goals it was set up to achieve? *(How do you know? By using qualitative and quantitative evaluation.)*

_____Is this an established, proven program—clearly one of quality—which our funding will serve to strengthen? *(How do you know? By using qualitative and quantitative evaluation.)*

_____Is this a new program or a promising approach with evidence of quality which our funding will serve to launch, develop and/or demonstrate? (See below for examples of promising approaches.)

BEST PRACTICES IN LITERACY—EFFECTIVE APPROACHES WORTH FUNDING

Each community has a variety of programs to meet different types of literacy needs. Although there are many different types of literacy programs—Adult Basic Education (ABE), English as a Second Language (ESL), native language literacy, General Equivalency Diploma (GED) preparation, family literacy and workplace literacy, to name a few—what they all have in common are their instructional approaches. The following approaches represent the most effective—those at the "cutting edge," in the view of many literacy professionals. Most programs combine two or more of these approaches.

- **Contextual (or "Functional Context") Approach.** Literacy is developed within the context of real-life applications and needs of the learner (for example, using the actual tasks and materials used on the job). Of the four approaches included here, this approach was derived from research on how adults learn best. The functional context approach is more motivating to learners; results in more rapid and lasting learning; achieves double gains (needed content and needed communications skills); and can decrease instructional time and thus program costs. The federal government is increasingly promoting this approach.

- **Learner-Centered Approach.** In this approach, learning themes and materials are selected according to learners' stated needs and preferences. The approach builds on learners' strengths—what they already know—rather than on "fixing" deficiencies as defined by others. It uses everyday materials that learners bring in or choose themselves and which are culturally and ethnically relevant to learners. Learner-developed materials are utilized: newsletters, plays and stories). Learners are the experts concerning their own programs and are actively involved in such program and instructional decisions as identifying program standards and outcomes and individualized goals.

- **Participatory Approach.** This approach is characterized by learners being actively involved in selecting topics and materials. Lecturing occurs only when necessary and is followed by a critical discussion of the lecture. There is a "rule of thumb" that 90 percent of the speaking in class should be by learners, and only 10 percent by teachers. Learners teach and learn from each other, and there is integration of experiential, hands-on activities such as internships in

schools or field trips to job sites. Interactive projects are completed by small groups within a larger class. For maximum interaction, there is a small teacher/learner ratio, never more than 1 to 15.

- **Use of New Learning Technologies.** Educational technology is not a substitute for teaching; it does not always reduce learning time, it requires staff training and it can cost more money than it saves. However, new technologies can be motivating, fun and effective as learning tools, especially when used in conjunction with the approaches listed above. Use of new technologies enables individualization and self-pacing, and builds skills transferrable to work settings. Examples of new technologies include computer software, interactive videodisc, audio and videocassette recorders, pocket calculators and television programs, usually accompanied by print materials. Computer-assisted instruction (CAI) is the most widely used.

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

- *Model Indicators of Program Quality for Adult Education Programs*. Office of Vocational and Adult Education, U.S. Department of Education, July 1992. Call Tammy Fortune, (202) 205-9996, to order multiple copies of this free 23-page pamphlet which lists the eight indicators (reprinted below on this fact sheet) and information about how they were developed.

- *Assessment of Literacy Needs and Resources*, United Way of America, 1990. This excellent tool provides survey questions that a volunteer team can use to identify the types and quality of literacy programs in your community, and organizations' infrastructure to support the program. This booklet was sent to all United Ways. To order more, just call.

- For information on program evaluation or on helping modify your state's quality indicators, contact the Association for Community Based Education (ACBE), (202) 462-6333. For two excellent articles on program evaluation and learner assessment, contact the Business Council for Effective Literacy (BCEL), (212) 512-2415, for their January 1990 newsletter, and the ERIC Clearinghouse, (800) 848-4815, for *Adult Literacy Education: Program Evaluation and Learner Assessment* (Document No. 338). For information on new technologies, call the Adult Literacy and Technology Project, c/o Lucy MacDonald, The Fearless Future, (503) 399-5242.

Many local United Ways have found that local partnerships and collaborations are an effective strategy for strengthening literacy in a community. To learn more about building literacy program partnerships and collaborations, see the United Way of America booklets *Selected Models of Literacy Collaboration, Communities Working Collaboratively for Change*, and *Community Initiatives in Literacy*. To learn more about workplace literacy, see the UWA booklets, *A Literate Workforce: What Business Can Do* and *United Way Involvement in Workplace Literacy*. To learn more about family literacy, see the accompanying UWA fact sheet.

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION MODEL INDICATORS OF PROGRAM QUALITY

The National Literacy Act, passed by Congress in 1991, called for development of indicators of program quality that could be used as models to judge program effectiveness. Federal funding for literacy appropriated through this act will be distributed by the states, which will evaluate literacy programs based on these model indicators (unless other indicators are developed by the states by July 1993). Knowing about these indicators may benefit you and literacy programs in your area in two ways: You may increase the quality of your programs, and you may be competitive for National Literacy Act funding. You can use these eight indicators (developed by consulting literacy practitioners and experts) as a guide for funding programs or for providing technical assistance for program improvement.

Educational Gains

Indicator 1: *Learners demonstrate progress toward attainment of basic skills and competencies that support their educational needs.*

Programs support learners' educational needs by promoting progress toward attainment of linguistic, mathematics, communication and problem-solving competencies. Progress is demonstrated by improvement in participants' ability to understand, speak, read and write English; to perform basic computations; and to function more effectively in the home, community and workplace.

Sample Measures

- Standardized test score gains.
- Competency-based test score gains.
- Teacher reports of gains/improvements in communication competencies.
- Alternative assessment methods (for example, portfolio assessment, student reports of attainment or improvement in specific employability or life skills).

Indicator 2: *Learners advance in the instructional program or complete program educational requirements that allow them to continue their education or training.*

Programs promote progression to higher levels of learning within the adult education program or promote the attainment of skills required for learners to advance to other education or training opportunities. Progress is demonstrated by participants' attainment of a credential or movement into other programs or skill levels.

Sample Measures

- Rate of student advancement to a higher level of skill or competency in the adult education program.
- Attainment of a competency certificate.
- Attainment of a GED or high school diploma.
- Percentage of students referred to other education or training programs.
- Percentage of students entering other education or training programs.

Program Planning

Indicator 3: *Program has a planning process that is ongoing and participatory; is guided by evaluation and based on a written plan that considers community demographics, needs, resources, and economic and technological trends; and is implemented to its fullest extent.*

Planning begins with a written plan that proceeds from the program's mission statement. The planning process is ongoing, with mechanisms for revising plans on a regular basis, drawing on input from program evaluations. Planning is responsive to the needs of learners and the community through input from staff, students and other appropriate programs and organizations in the community.

Sample Measures

- Existence of a planning document that specifies program goals and objectives and is regularly reviewed and revised.
- Openness of the program to community input through mechanisms such as an advisory board, staff meetings, student questionnaires and public hearings (checklist); and frequency with which these sources are consulted.
- Evidence of use of documents in the planning process having data on community needs (such as census data or needs assessments).
- Program plan matches community needs regarding location of classes, skills taught and type of program services offered (for example, sufficient ABE or basic literacy instruction).
- Existence of program evaluation component and evidence that evaluation feeds into the planning process.
- Congruence between planned program activities and actual activities.

Curriculum and Instruction

Indicator 4: *Program has curriculum and instruction geared to individual student learning styles and levels of student needs.*

Curriculum and instruction are individualized to meet the educational needs of students with diverse educational and cultural backgrounds. Since students have different learning styles and goals, instruction includes a variety of instructional approaches and strategies. To ensure the program's success in meeting student needs and capturing changes in those needs, student and staff input is obtained periodically.

Sample Measures

- Use of student assessment information to inform the instructional process.
- Existence of student goal-setting process linked to decisions on instructional materials, approaches and strategies.
- Instructional content addresses educational needs of individual students.
- Instructional strategies used and frequency with which they are used, measured through observation or self-report.

Staff Development

Indicator 5: *Program has an ongoing staff development process that considers the specific needs of its staff, offers training in the skills necessary to provide quality instruction and includes opportunities for practice and systematic follow-up.*

The program's staff development is designed to enable staff to provide quality instruction by meeting their specific training needs. Staff development begins with an orientation to the goals and philosophy of the program for new staff and continues with periodic training on effective practice. The process also includes input from staff and students to identify needs, and practice and follow-up to ensure effective instruction.

Sample Measures

- Presence or absence of preservice and in-service staff development opportunities that include a program overview, philosophy and goals of the program and ongoing topics appropriate to adult learning.
- Existence of process for identifying staff development needs.
- Staff development based on known promising practices.
- Effective staff performance as measured by student ratings or observations of staff.
- Percentage of staff needs met through training activities.
- Average hours of preservice and in-service staff development training received by staff.

Support Services

Indicator 6: *Program identifies students' needs for support-services and makes services available to students directly or through referral to other educational and service agencies with which the program coordinates.*

Programs identify support-services needs that affect participation in the program and promote student access to these services by referral to other agencies or direct provision of service. The program has formal or informal coordination linkages with other service providers to facilitate referral.

Sample Measures

- Presence of a process for identifying student support-services needs.
- Presence of agreements or linkages between the program and child-care and transportation providers.
- Number and type of support services provided.
- Number and type of support services to which students are referred.
- Percentage of students obtaining specific, needed services through the program or through referral.

Recruitment

Indicator 7: *Program successfully recruits community population identified in the Adult Education Act as needing literacy services.*

Sample Measures

- Types of recruitment activities the program performs.
- Percentage of target population enrolled compared with state demographics.
- Percentage of students enrolled with specific characteristics compared with the population with these characteristics in need of instruction in the service area.
- Percentage of target populations enrolled compared with state average.

Retention

Indicator 8: *Students remain in the program long enough to meet their educational needs.*

Retention is measured in light of student progress toward meeting their educational needs by time in program. Retention benchmarks are established that account for the type of program and learning gains expected for a given number of hours in the program.

Sample Measures

- Hours in program by type of program and learning gains achieved as measured by student progress.
- Percentage of students returning to the program within specified time period.

SUGGESTED NEXT STEPS FOR YOUR UNITED WAY

_____ Order copies of the *Model Indicators of Program Quality* and United Way's *Assessment of Literacy Needs and Resources*.

_____ Using one or both of the above tools, assess your local literacy programs.

_____ Distribute this fact sheet to your board and identify together your literacy funding criteria.

_____ Support or assist your funded literacy programs to conduct a self-assessment of program quality.

YOUR NEXT QUESTIONS OR NEEDS

Call Education & Literacy Initiative, United Way of America, (703) 836-7100.

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